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Mapping networks of influence: Tracking Twitter conversations through time and space

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Abstract:

The increasing use of social media around global news events, such as the London Olympics in 2012, raises questions for international broadcasters about how to engage with users via social media in order to best achieve their individual missions. Twitter is a highly diverse social network whose conversations are multi-directional involving individual users, political and cultural actors, athletes and a range of media professionals. In so doing, users form networks of influence via their interactions affecting the ways that information is shared about specific global events.

This article attempts to understand how networks of influence are formed among Twitter users, and the relative influence of global news media organisations and information providers in the Twittersphere during such global news events. We build an analysis around a set of tweets collected during the 2012 London Olympics. To understand how different users influence the conversations across Twitter, we compare three types of accounts: those belonging to a number of well-known athletes, those belonging to some well-known commentators employed by the BBC, and a number of corporate accounts belonging to the BBC World Service and the official London Twitter account. We look at the data from two perspectives. First, to understand the structure of the social groupings formed among Twitter users, we use a network analysis to model social groupings in the Twittersphere across time and space. Second, to assess the influence of individual tweets, we investigate

the ageing factor of tweets, which measures how long users continue to interact with a particular tweet after it is originally posted.

We consider what the profile of particular tweets from corporate and athletes' accounts can tell us about how networks of influence are forged and maintained. We use these analyses to answer the questions: How do different types of accounts help shape the social networks? and, What determines the level and type of influence of a particular account?

Keywords: Network analysis, Key Actor Analysis, Ageing Factor

Introduction

We live in a world of networks shaped by diverse social groups, relationships and interactions including kinship, friendship, neighbourhood, work, online and social media networks. As Steve Borgatti has argued, 'one of the most potent ideas in the social sciences is the notion that individuals are embedded in thick webs of social relations and interactions' (Borgatti et al. 2009).

The internet and social networks have allowed the consumption of information to move from a primarily broadcast model, in which information was provided by a small number of providers, to a more conversational model, consisting of traditional providers, commentators through blogs and real-time discussions through social media such as Twitter and Facebook. The traditional broadcast media are engaging with this changing landscape by maintaining their own bloggers and social media accounts.

The natural occurrence of data on these social interactions via social media allows research to benefit from the advantages of the unobtrusive research methods identified in classical sociology (Webb et al. 1966) and interpreted for the online environment by Janetzko (2008). Understanding the nature of the networks within which major organisations and information services operate provides important insights into the ways information flows through these networks, how influence and engagement can be mapped and measured, and the cultural power and value which results from these communication and information networks.

Context

The 2012 London Olympic and Paralympic Games were anticipated 'to be a "once in a generation" opportunity for the UK to attract the attention and interest of the entire global community'.¹ To that end, the UK Government stated the intention, as host nation, to 'exploit the public diplomacy and "soft power" potential of the Games'.² To exploit this opportunity, the organisation of London 2012 involved a wider set of actors within and outside the government than had sometimes been the approach of previous hosts. It was

hoped that this would extend the reach of the games beyond traditional elites' interests (Li 2013).

In addition to the efforts of UK government departments, the FCO Minister with responsibility for public diplomacy would henceforth 'focus on providing specific ministerial supervision of the relationship between the FCO and its directly funded partners', primarily the British Council and British Broadcasting Corporation World Service (BBCWS).³

As Nick Cull argued in his written evidence to the Written Evidence to the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee,

Media consumption is a behaviour strongly influenced by habit, and Olympic coverage provides an opportunity to inspire new habits in the global audience, or rekindle old habits such as attention to the broadcasts and web sites of the BBC World Service. (p. EV37)⁴

The increased penetration of internet access and adoption of social media provided a way in which the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and the BBC World Service could engage with communities interested in the Olympic Games and use new platforms to kindle (or rekindle) the habit of interacting with content produced by the broadcaster.

As the BBC World Service was part of the strategy to exploit the public diplomacy and 'soft power' potential of the Games, our paper looks at the social media interaction with BBC and BBC World Service accounts on Twitter. In traditional broadcasting the BBC has maintained a division between domestic and overseas services, with the exception of some countries such as the Netherlands. However, social media platforms permit users to ignore institutional boundaries between 'domestic' and 'foreign' focused services. As a result, analysis included both BBC and BBC World Service accounts.

In this essay we investigate how user interactions with Twitter reflect the ways in which different actors in the Twittersphere have varying roles and influences. The different ways in which broadcasters engage with social media users affects how their audiences interact with them. As an example of a major international broadcaster, we take a particular focus on the BBC World Service, and use user interactions with a number of the BBC's Twitter accounts to investigate the effects of the different ways in which users engage with the BBC World Service's presence on Twitter.

To this end, we present a novel method for identifying key actors in a network based on the habits of users who engage with, and respond to, the BBC via Twitter. This approach looks beyond media consumption patterns of traditional audience research and emphasises the way users respond to broadcasters and share content via social media. Over the last twenty years, some researchers have increasingly argued that 'there isn't really such a thing as the "audience" out there'. Instead, as Grossberg argued, 'media audiences are shifting constellations, located within varying multiple discourses which are never entirely outside of the media discourse themselves' (Grossberg 1988:386).

By analysing the habits and shifting constellations of users sharing content via social media, we argue that individual citizens, members of organisations like the BBCWS, and sports celebrities are influential in different ways. Our approach to key actor analysis identifies the different roles individuals play in a group or network. We then analyse the speed with which users respond to content produced by key actors and describe a method of measuring the public engagement with individual tweets. The combination of the two methods allows us to consider the different models of engagement used by the BBC.

Mapping Influence through social media network analysis

An area of increasing interest for social science and audience research is the impact of social media on the production and dissemination of news. This includes the influence the 'social' aspect of social media has on the flow of information amongst publics at home and abroad (Boyd and Ellison 2007; Newman et al. 2012; Xu and Sang 2014). To mention but a few studies, research has examined the role of social media in political change (Shirky 2011), in sharing information about elections (Mäkinen and Kuira 2008; Metzgar and Maruggi 2009), and even attempts to forecast large-scale human behaviour (Leetaru 2011). These studies follow on from one of the classic questions in social science, 'How does the news get around?' posed by Larsen and Hill (1954:426). This question has been asked in forms, such as how people locate job opportunities (Granovetter 1973) or seek trusted information (Levin and Cross 2004), and how small communities connect to form large social structures which allow two individuals who have never met to send and receive information through long chains of acquaintances (Milgram 1967).

Studies analysing how news and information flow through a community often return to the questions posed by Larsen and Hill: 'Who learned the news, when and by what means, and how much did such knowledge affect subsequent communications behaviour?' (Larsen and Hill 1954:426). While these questions have been addressed from many angles over the years, including polling in the aftermath of specific events such as the September 11th terrorist attacks (Rogers 2003), the increasing ability to access news via social media provides greater opportunities to understand diffusion of information between the users of these platforms. This has led an evolution of research from looking at the 'audience' as a consumer to analysing the constellations of interconnected individuals creating, sharing and consuming information. This in turn has increasingly emphasised within audience research the different ways individuals or organisations can be influential in the transmission and interpretation of news.

The increased popularity of social media has led some researchers to suggest that aggregating Twitter content could produce results 'analogous to a distributed news wire service' (Sankaranarayanan et al. 2009). One important aspect of social media, and digital media more generally, is the relative ease with which the data on the communication between individuals can be gathered, allowing large-scale network graphs to be constructed which represent the communication between individuals contained in a

specific dataset. This has led to increased use of social network analysis in the investigation of the diffusion of information on social platforms.

Social network analysis is a distinctive research approach within the social and behavioural sciences. The analysis of networks has ranged from the transmission of disease and the diffusion of innovation, to the dissemination of ideas and information (Christakis and Fowler 2007; Erikson 2013; Gainforth 2014). Relationships have been shown to influence the ways in which an individual accesses social support and social capital (Wellman and Haase 2001; Luke and Harris 2007). Across the range of disciplines in which social network analysis has been used, from studying family ties in Renaissance Florence (Padgett 1994) to connections in covert terrorist networks (Krebs 2002), and calls between mobile phone users in Côte d'Ivoire, (Blondel et al. 2012) the academic investigation focuses on the importance of the relationships between interacting actors or units of analysis (Wasserman and Faust 1994). It investigates the societal structures and social context through which information travels. This rich history of studies provides the depth of conceptual approaches that can be applied to research into social and digital media as online platforms and the 'internet of things' as they become increasingly important aspects of daily life, specifically in the consumption of news media.

To investigate how corporate and individual accounts fulfil different roles within a socially mediated news environment such as Twitter, we use key actor analysis. This analysis identifies those users that are important to the core of the network and those that are in influential positions to share content with a wide community of Twitter users interested in the London Olympics. This is a potentially different method from that which a mainstream broadcaster might adopt, as it focuses on defining the account by its role within the wider system of information sharing rather than on benchmarking levels of interaction against competitors.

Data collection

The starting point for the network analysis is an appropriate data collection. The results in this paper are based on the data collections from the Twitter Streaming API (see 'Tweeting The Olympics: the Methodological Framework' article in this section). The collection used a prototype for the data collection tool now available as part of the COSMOS Desktop social media analysis workbench.⁵

The English language subsection of the corpus contains 3,906,569 English tweets, collected over the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games, running from the 26th of July to the 14th of August 2012. These tweets were obtained by following a list of accounts, developed in collaboration with the BBC World Service research team. The collection criteria contained a total of just over one thousand accounts to follow, containing lists of BBC corporate accounts, accounts of BBC pundits (ie. named individuals representing the BBC) and the accounts of several participating athletes. As a comparison to the BBC corporate accounts, the official LOCOG (London Organising Committee of the Olympic and Paralympic Games) twitter account, @london2012,⁶ was also followed.

In particular, the collection includes all tweets that were posted by those accounts during the Olympics, all of the retweets of those tweets, and all tweets which were sent in reply to those tweets. As no further filtering by keyword or hashtag took place, the collection contains the tweets sent by the accounts followed as well as any retweets of and replies to these tweets.

Figure 1 (below) shows the number of English tweets collected each day during the Olympics. It can be seen that there are large spikes in the numbers of tweets collected on 27th July (the opening ceremony), and 12 August (the closing ceremony), where in both cases, the following day also shows the continuing activity from those two ceremonies. The data does show that more tweets were collected during the closing ceremony than the opening ceremony, possibly reflecting increased public interest in the Olympics over the two weeks of the event.

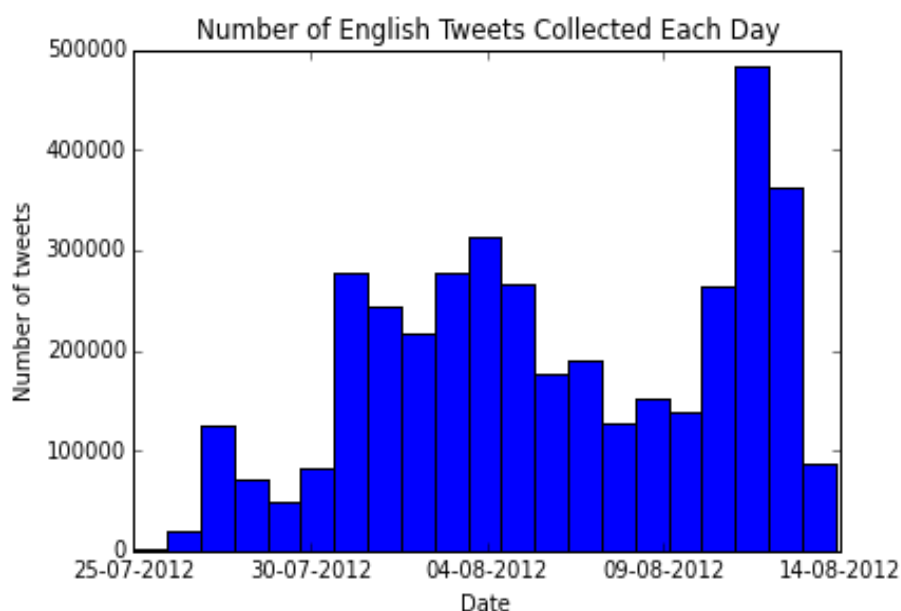


Figure 1: Number of English tweets collected each day

Constructing a Network Graph

The starting point for network analysis is a representation of the relationships between the members of a specific network in what is known as a *network graph*. In each case, the relationship is represented by a line, known as an edge or arc, which connects the two interacting units, which are known as *nodes* in a network graph. As data is added, the network grows from one connection between two points (known as a *dyad*) into a large-scale network representation. These can range from small networks to the 69 billion friendship links between 721 million Facebook users (Backstrom et al. 2012) or the 61.6 million vertices and 1.47 billion edges from a study of Twitter (Ediger et al. 2010).

In order to create a representation of the information-sharing network on Twitter, an *edge* is created for each user who retweeted or mentioned another user. Using this

technique, previous research found that there was a 'pattern in social media toward clustering into insular like-minded communities' and concluded that these clusters were 'unmistakable' (Lynch et al. 2014). This clustering behaviour has profound implications for researching the dissemination, interpretation and influence of news on Twitter, and for assumptions about the potential of social media for opening participation in a global public sphere.

Constructing a network graph enables us to see who is interacting with whom, the habits which individuals adopt, whether these habits form clusters within the network, what the nature of those clusters is, and what this network mapping reveals about how, for example, users interact with the BBC World Service. As noted earlier, network analysis emphasises the importance of the relationships between interacting actors or units of analysis (Wasserman and Faust 1994) and identifies users who are influential within the network.

In the social network graphs built for this study, the interacting units, in the terms of Wasserman and Faust, are Twitter users. These interacting units are known as nodes on the social network graph. The process of constructing the network graph from the 3,906,569 tweets in the English language corpus found that there were 960,499 individual Twitter accounts within the data set that were either the author of a tweet or mentioned in a tweet at least once.

A relationship between the 'interacting units' is created each time a Twitter user tweets to other users. This might involve interactions among individual Twitter users or between Twitter users and the BBC or BBC World Service in response to corporate outputs, accounts and/or communications.

Each interaction is represented on the resulting graph as a line between the node which represents the user that created the original tweet, and the node representing the user that re-tweeted that content. Each node represents one Twitter account (or Twitter user). Each edge (\rightarrow) represents a tweet that goes from one user to another. We say 'A's tweet goes to B' or 'A tweeted to B' ($A \rightarrow B$) if one of the three cases occurred:

- User A **replied** to a post of user B (using Twitter 'Reply' functionality);
- User A **retweeted** a post of user B (i.e. user A posted a copy of user B's post which indicated that B was the original author);
- User A **mentioned** user B in their post using Twitter's conventional symbol '@'.

The number of individual interactions identified from the 3,906,569 tweets in the English language corpus was 2,215,379 replies, retweets or mentions. As some users retweeted or mentioned the same user more than once during the period of data collection, the actual number of relationships identified between the 960,499 nodes in the network was 1,367,321.⁷ Closer examination of the network data found that only 325,771 of the 960,499 users appear in the data more than once. This means that for the majority of users (66%),

interaction with the content produced by the approximately 1,000 accounts on the original list was a single, perhaps even ephemeral, activity.

To build the network representation, an edge list was created of all the edges identified in the data. A visual representation of the network is shown in **Figure 2**. In **Figure 2**, users with similar combinations of connections are arranged together, with colours used to highlight the statistically different clusters (discussed in the modularity section below). Note that the network contains clusters centred around information sources (eg. @london2012 and @BBCSport) and clusters centred around key athletes (eg. Tom Daley and Ryan Lochte, whose accounts are @TomDaley1994 and @ryanlochte respectively).

In the visualisation in **Figure 2**, the thickness of the edge from A to B indicates the number of times that A tweeted to B (most of the edges are thin and represent only one tweet).⁸

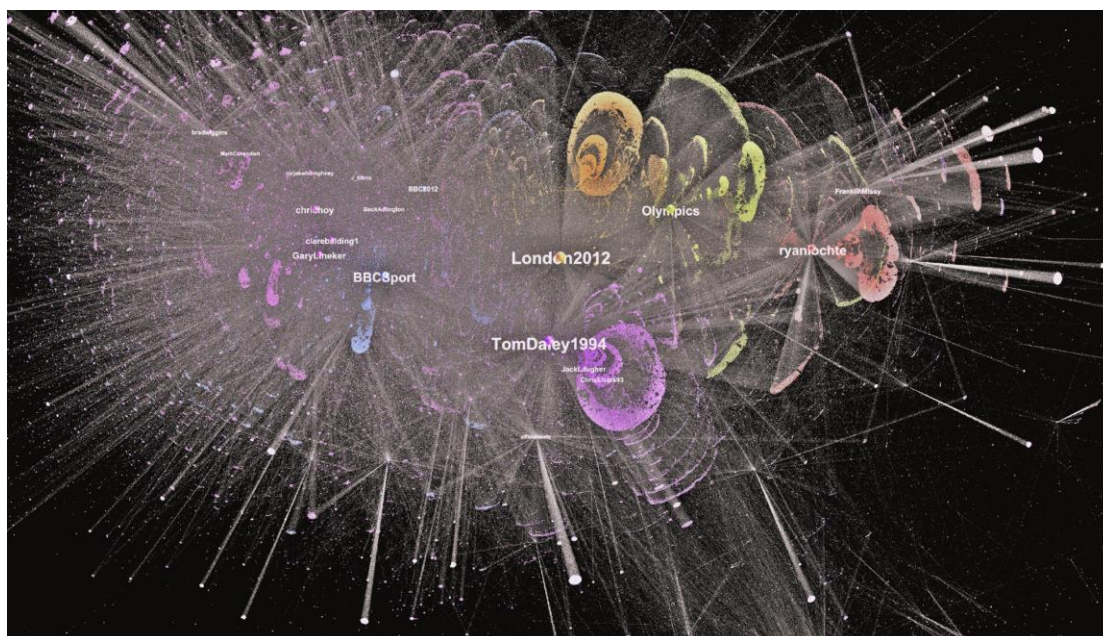


Figure 12: Representation of a network graph

Network Metrics

Modularity:

Once the network graph has been drawn, it is possible to analyse whether the data contains a single large network where all nodes interact equally with others, or whether the network is in fact a collection of smaller sub-communities or clusters which engage in dense interactions within that sub-community. This is one of the keys to identifying whether the Olympics data represents a single global conversation or many distinct smaller conversations.

One of the techniques for identifying sub-communities within the network is known as *modularity*, and is used to identify interconnected clusters within the network. Modularity is a form of statistical analysis of the network graph which measures how well a

network can be decomposed into smaller sub-networks or *modular communities* (Blondel et al. 2008). This measure identifies the range of smaller communities that are more closely interconnected as compared with the rest of the network.

The modularity calculation on the network graph resulted in the identification of forty distinct modular communities.⁹ However, of these forty communities only nine modular communities individually contained more than one percent of the users in the entire network. The largest community comprised a quarter of all the nodes in the network, whereas the smallest 31 communities collectively account for only 1.31% of the entire network (**Figure 3**).

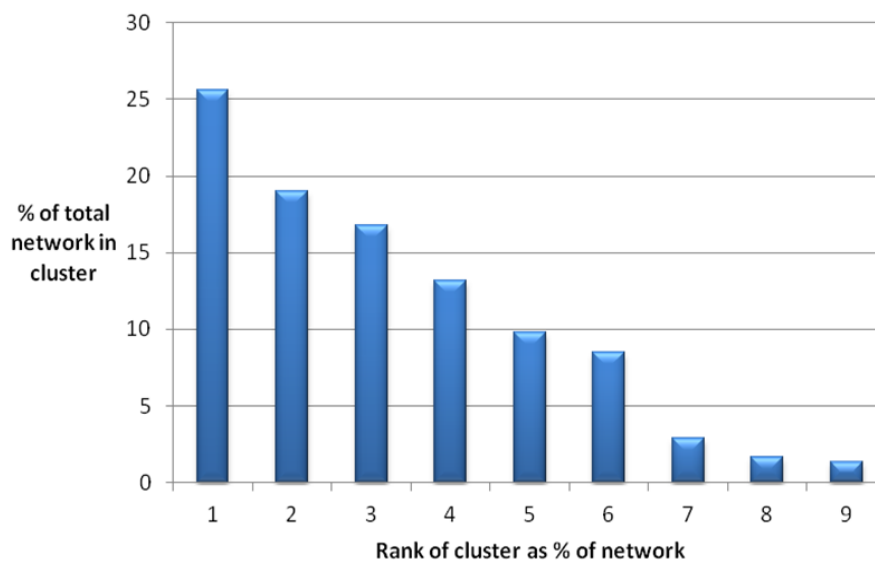


Figure 23: The top nine modular communities ranked by size as a percentage of the entire network. (Only communities greater than 1% are

Our use of this technique was quite revealing. It showed that the World Service's ambitions to generate a 'global conversation' (conversations shared by a global network of contributors and participants) were undercut by the presence of myriad small clusters of tweeters having distinctive conversations. This indicated a much more fragmented picture than the one imagined by the BBC's notions of the global conversation.

Centrality:

Within network analysis, one set of metrics is a measure of centrality. Each centrality measure provides a different perspective on how influential or important (central) a node or actor is within a specific network. There are a wide range of options for calculating centrality (Valente et al. 2008) but our study used the following three: (i) Degree, (ii) Betweenness and (iii) PageRank to analyse the networks. This allowed us to assess the influence of specific accounts within a wider social network.

Degree:

Degree centrality is the number of relationships that connect to a specific node. For example, if I had five friends and drew a network graph that represented these friendships, the node representing me would have a degree centrality of 5. For the BBC World Service, the figure will of course be much higher. The degree of a node is the number of lines that coincide with it (Wasserman and Faust 1994).

Betweenness:

Betweenness centrality refers to how often a node lies on the shortest path between any two nodes in the network. Actors who rank highly on betweenness centrality have the potential to influence others near them in a network (Friedkin 1991). This may occur through direct and indirect pathways. A node with high betweenness centrality has greater potential influence over the spread of information through the network either by facilitating, hindering, or even transforming the form and content of communication between others (Freeman 1978; Newman 2003). This is important for understanding how influence flows through networks.

In our example, to rank highly on betweenness centrality a user must fulfil two criteria:

1. They must be mentioning or retweeting other Twitter accounts
2. They must be mentioned or retweeted by other Twitter users

High betweenness often indicates a unique or almost unique position bridging between one group of users and the rest of the network as all the shortest paths have to pass through that single user. This helps us understand 'Bridge Figures' in networks – actors who are influential in bridging and shaping flows of communication and information.

PageRank:

PageRank revolutionised the process of delivering web search results for Google and others (Brin and Page 1998). PageRank refers to the probability distribution for nodes in a network. In other words, it is a measure of how likely a user is to reach a specific node from other nodes in a network. As such it is also a marker of influence. A shorthand way of thinking about PageRank is that the PageRank of a specific node *A* is influenced by the degree centrality of node *A* *in conjunction with* the degree centrality of the nodes which connect to node *A*.

The reason PageRank takes both these elements into account is that it uses the idea of *random surfers* finding their way across the internet by clicking a link on a web page, landing on the next web page and clicking a link, which takes them to a third page and so on. Brin and Page (the 'Page' in PageRank) applied the concept of the random surfer to measure the intuitive justification that web pages 'that are well cited from many places

around the Web are worth looking at. Also, pages that have perhaps only one citation from something like the Yahoo! homepage are also generally worth looking at' (Brin and Page 1998:110).

In our case, this logic could be restated as follows: people who are frequently retweeted are worth looking at, as are people who are not retweeted frequently – but when they are, they are retweeted by well-known accounts – perhaps a major news provider, or an influential individual such as @BarakObama. We applied this measure to see which accounts in the collection were being frequently retweeted during the London Olympics, and to gain further insights into flows of information and patterns of influence in the Twittersphere.

Calculating PageRank requires the researcher to define the *damping factor* to ensure that all areas of the graph have an equal opportunity to be ranked highly. While users interface with Twitter in a slightly different way to classic websites, it is still important for the analysis to ensure the entire graph has an equal chance of being ranked highly, a function the damping factor fulfils. For our use of PageRank, the damping factor was set at (0.85 / 15%). This damping factor was selected as it was the level suggested by Brin and Page. It was also highlighted by Becchetti and Castillo (2006) who, in their analysis of PageRank, observed that the 'typical damping factor used in practice is between 0.85 and 0.90'. This allows one to set parameters of probability in likely behaviour and to measure actual behaviour against these norms – enabling a more accurate picture to emerge.

Olympics data

The first centrality metric from the network data on the London Olympics was weighted in-degree, equivalent to the number of times a user was retweeted or mentioned. It should be noted that the method of data collection means the most mentioned accounts are likely to appear in the list of over 1,000 accounts that were being followed as part of the study. However, given that mentions of those 1,000 accounts on the list have an equal likelihood of being recorded, the data represents how the different accounts being monitored fared in comparison to other accounts on the list. The following findings should therefore be considered in relation to the accounts being monitored and not their position within the tweets about the London Olympics in their entirety.

From accounts monitored for the study, those that were mentioned or retweeted most frequently spanned a range of types of account, including those of athletes such as Chris Hoy (@ChrisHoy), Ryan Lochte and Tom Daley, BBC corporate accounts such as @BBCSport, commentators who appeared on the BBC such as Gary Lineker (@GaryLineker) and Clare Balding (@ClareBalding1) and the official LOCOG account, @london2012 (**Figure 4**).

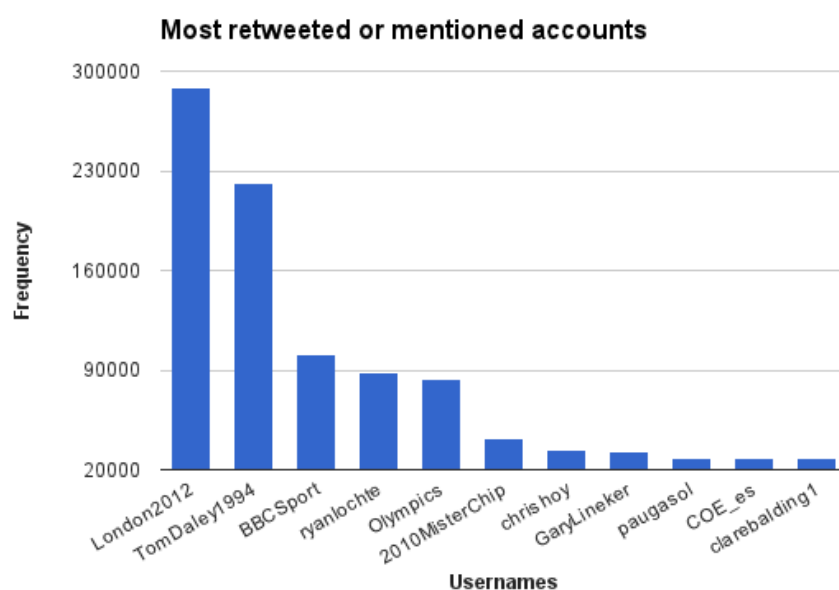


Figure 34: Most retweeted or mentioned accounts

The top ranked accounts by PageRank contain several of these accounts (**Figure 5**). Their high PageRank, in comparison to other accounts that were monitored for the study, reflects the likelihood that those accounts would have access to privileged information about specific events or athletes, or alternatively were recognised as an integral part of the Olympic Games. It therefore makes sense that athletes and commentators would appear

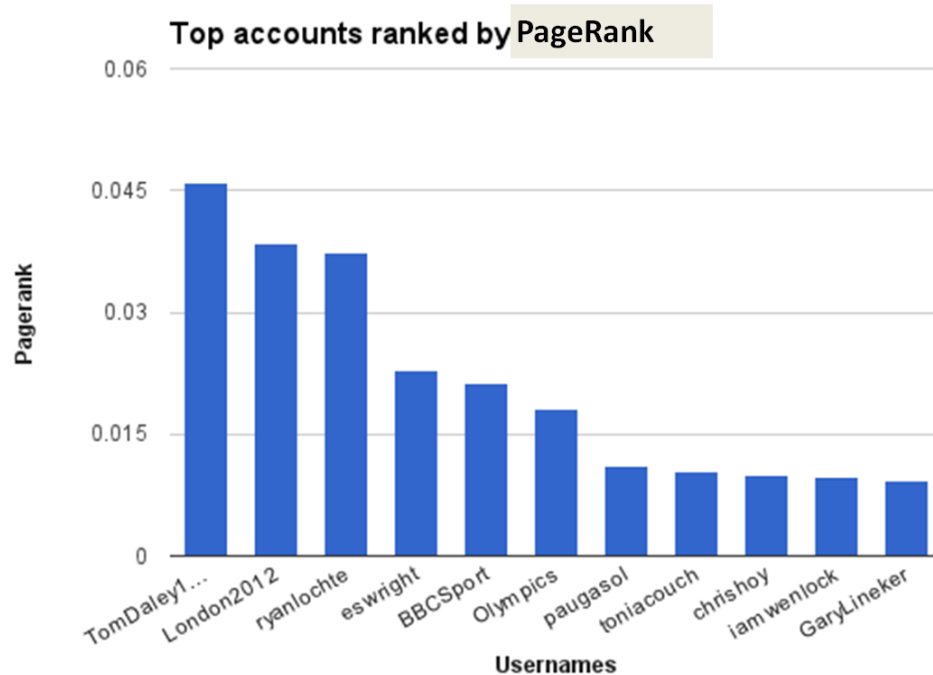


Figure 45: Top accounts by PageRank

highly ranked. In addition, the Olympic mascot (Wenlock) and Erika Wright, who manages some of the Olympic Athletes, also appear more highly ranked here than in total volume of interactions. This reflects that other highly ranked users are likely to be mentioning or retweeting them.

From the perspective of betweenness, @BBCSport ranks far higher than other accounts, reflecting that this account had the ability to reach users that others did not (**Figure 6**). This may be because @BBCSport provided news on a range of Olympic events and athletes. In contrast, many of the other accounts focused on specific athletes, team or events.

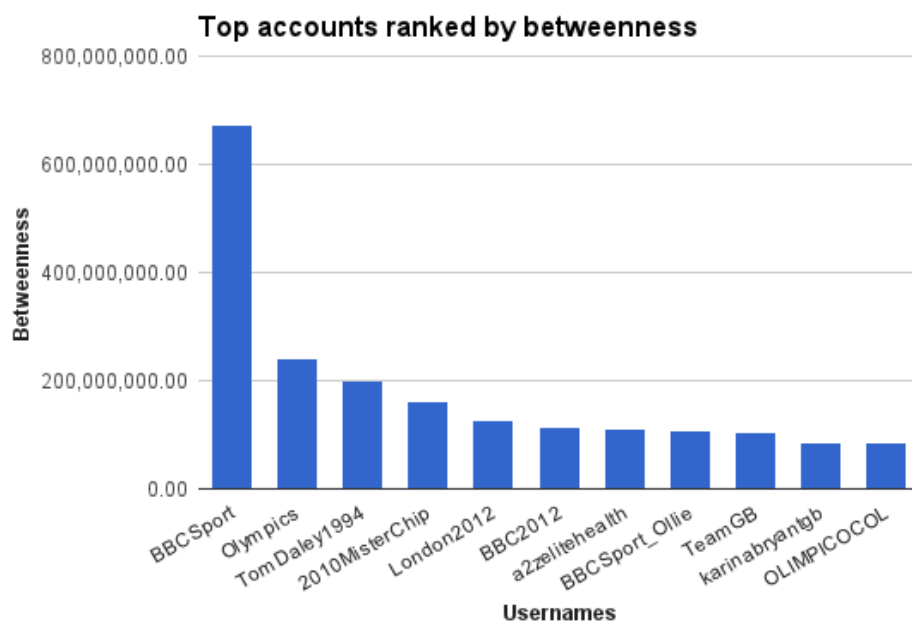


Figure 56: Top accounts ranked by betweenness

These three metrics individually provide specific perspectives on who was important in the network of Twitter users sharing information about the London Olympics. While these individual perspectives provide valuable insights into particular elements of a network, in real life, Twitter users are simultaneously fulfilling a range of roles to varying extents in the network. To show the extent that users fulfil different roles in the network, we use Key Actor Analysis.

Key Actor Analysis

Identifying influential members in a network has been a key focus of network analysis. Many different approaches have been suggested (Wilson and Banzhaf 2009; Tayebi et al. 2011; Hsu et al. 2009). In this study we present a novel method for identifying key actors in a network. Just as individuals are influential in different ways, this approach to key actor analysis identifies the different roles individuals play in a group or network.

This approach builds on a method suggested by Conway (2009) which, in turn, draws on work examining correlations between different network metrics by Valente et al. (2008). However, where Conway initially suggested using eigenvector centrality as a measure, we have chosen to use PageRank (Newman 2003:210) instead. The PageRank algorithm combines the eigenvector calculation with a 'damping factor' that ensures the algorithm runs the calculation on disconnected elements of the network.

Method

To identify key actors we used a process of plotting two network metrics – Betweenness and PageRank – against each other. Betweenness represents how important a user is in facilitating the flow of information to specific parts of the network. Individuals fulfilling this role are often known as *bridges* or *gatekeepers* and are valuable as they select and tailor information to users in a specific part of the network.

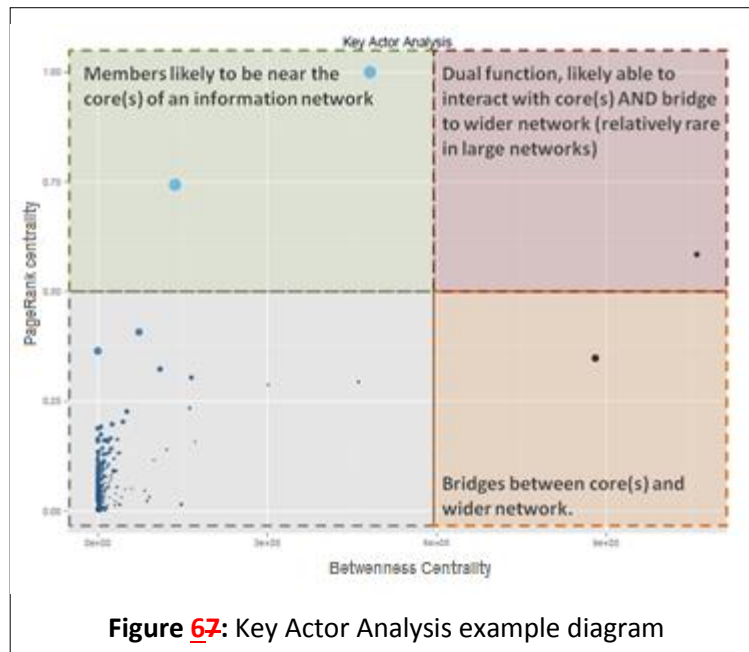
Those with a high PageRank score are key members of the network because other important network members interact with them. These users are heavily invested in the activity of that network, and are usually recognised as important actors by other members.

The following figure illustrates how Key Actor Analysis diagrams are structured on an example dataset. This is a scatterplot diagram. Each circle on the diagram represents one Twitter account in the London Olympics dataset. The circles are positioned in alignment with two axes. The horizontal axis represents their Betweenness centrality (i.e. ability to bridge communities of the network). The vertical axis represents their PageRank centrality (i.e. their relative importance in the network). The diagram is loosely partitioned into four quadrants which represent three types of key actors (in top-left, bottom-right and top-right) and a quadrant of non-key actors (bottom left).)

- Users in the bottom left quadrant tend to have no particular role and can be thought of as (the majority of) general users.
- Users in the top left with high PageRank but low betweenness tend to be in the core (or one of the cores) of the network. This indicates they are often those most involved and are likely to exert influence by providing access to privileged information. They are likely to be driving discussion and therefore can be valued as *authorities*: trusted sources of information that others will go on to share.
- Users in the bottom right quadrant, with high betweenness but low PageRank, fulfil the role of bridging between the core content producers and a specific community (or 'audience'). The value of this role often comes from tailoring information and, as such, these users are most valuable to a specific group, but less important to everyone else. They also often share content from other sources in addition to their own content.
- Users in the top right, scoring highly on both metrics, are rare. They have a dual function, in that they have the same trusted status as those in the top

left quadrant, yet also fulfill the same 'bridge' role as users in the bottom right quadrant, reaching areas of the network which others do not.

Figure 7 illustrates how a scatterplot of key network actors can be used to identify nodes that fulfil different roles in the network:



Using the data from the London Olympics, **Figure 8** shows the relative positions of Twitter accounts plotted against PageRank and Betweenness. The size of the circle represents the third metric, in-degree, representing the number of times an account was retweeted or mentioned.

In the top left of the graph, @TomDaley1994, @London2012, and @RyanLochte are core sources of information. The athletes Tom Daley and Ryan Lochte were natural sources of information on their own progress, while as the official Olympics channel, @London2012 provided up to date information on a range of relevant information.

In addition, journalists and commentators such as @ClareBalding1 and @GaryLineker also appear to be primarily a source of information – most likely due to their role presenting BBC coverage of the London Olympics.

Importantly, by combining the three metrics we see that although @BBCSport was mentioned less frequently than @TomDaley1994 or @London2012, the @BBCSport account was an important bridge to a community of users that other accounts did not reach.

The work on network metrics allows us to understand whether different types of accounts fulfil different roles within the network. In the following sections, we look at what responses to the tweets themselves might tell us about different roles in the network.

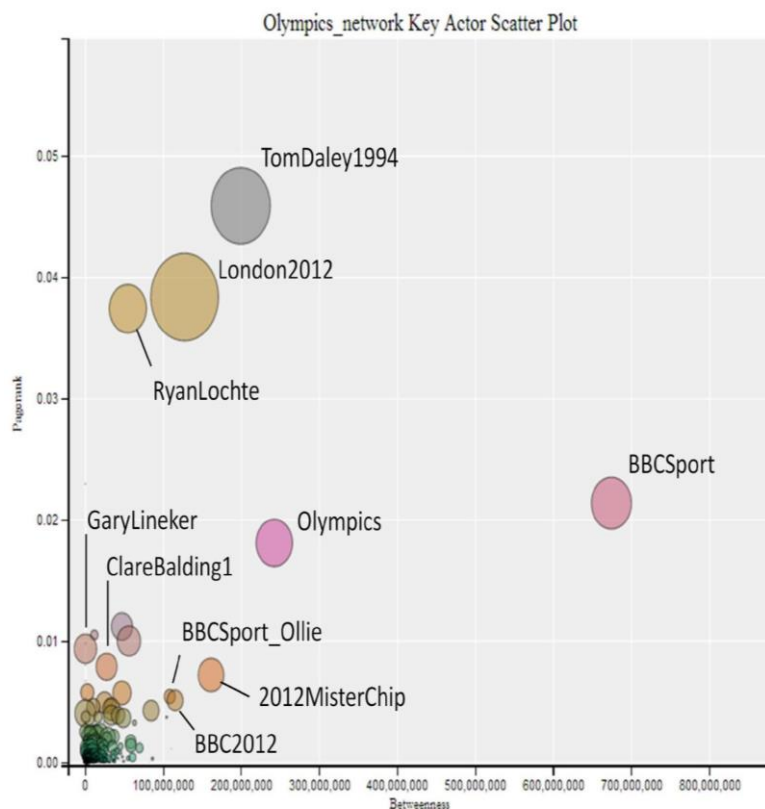


Figure 78: Olympics network Key Actor Analysis scatter plot

Influence of accounts through Ageing Factors

While a network analysis can yield insights into the influence of different accounts by examining the connections between those accounts and their tweets, it may also be possible to gain insights by profiling how an account's individual tweets behave following their original posting. Cha et al. (2010) argue for the benefit of the counts of retweets over the connectedness of a user's account, as 'retweets represent influence of a user beyond one's one-to-one interaction domain'.

The amount of influence of an individual tweet might reasonably be estimated in terms of how long that tweet remains relevant to the group of users who engage with it. One way of estimating whether the tweet is still relevant to those users is whether they are still retweeting that tweet. A user is likely to retweet a tweet that strikes a chord with them, and so we might realistically suppose that a widely retweeted tweet has had a wider influence than a tweet that has been retweeted relatively little. As well as the total number of retweets, an important question will also be for how long a tweet remains relevant. If a tweet is retweeted several hours after the original post was made (a significant time-period in Twitter-time), then we might similarly consider that tweet to be more influential. Tweets which are still considered worth retweeting after several hours might be considered more influential than those which are no longer retweeted after an hour or two. As the rate of

retweeting drops off quite rapidly after the tweet is originally posted, then a measure of the decay of the retweeting rate is often proposed as an appropriate measure for estimating the time for which a tweet remains active (Bhattacharya and Ram 2012; Eysenbach 2011).

By investigating how users engage with different types of known public accounts, such as the BBC's corporate accounts and those of named individuals associated with the BBC, it may be possible to determine how different forms of information dissemination are appropriate for different kinds of engagement. When dealing with traditional corporate information providers, how do users of Twitter engage with the corporate accounts, compared with those associated with a named individual?

To attempt to answer this question, in this section, we consider the *ageing factor* of a tweet (Uren and Dadzie 2012) as a measure of the influence that an individual tweet might have. The ageing factor is an estimate of how long a tweet is considered to remain current, by considering for how long the tweet continues to be retweeted.

This work builds on Brookes' work in information science, which attempted to formalise the understanding of information communication by modelling citation rates in bibliometrics. Brookes' (1970) work on annual ageing factor of a publication, and its associated rate of obsolescence has been a highly influential mechanism for understanding the use of literature among a particular group of users (Bawden 2008). In the same way, we suggest that by applying Brookes' models to the obsolescence and spread of tweets, we will obtain similar insights into how tweets are used by the Twitter community.

Ageing Factor

The extremely rapid fall-off in the rate of retweeting suggests that in practice, the decay happens over a few hours; the ageing factor of a tweet (Uren and Dadzie 2012) has been proposed as a suitable mechanism for measuring the longevity of a tweet. The ageing factor of a tweet after time t is a normalised measure of the number of times a tweet has been retweeted at time t as a fraction of all the retweets of that tweet, and for a given tweet, the ageing factor measure is given as:

$$AF^i = \sqrt[i]{\frac{\text{Retweets after } i \text{ hours}}{\text{total number of retweets}}}$$

The factor i is chosen as an appropriate time unit for the document under consideration. In Brookes' work on citation of scientific publication, the time was measured in units of a year. Uren and Dadzie's analysis finds that in Twitter, an appropriate time unit is an hour.

The ageing factor tends towards 1 more slowly for tweets that are still being tweeted a long time after originally being posted. For example, the following tweet sent by the British diver Tom Daley in advance of the closing ceremony:

Closing ceremony tonight!!!!

was retweeted a total of 13,668 times. The number of times that this tweet was retweeted in the hours following the initial post is shown in **Figure 9**. After an initial flurry of retweeting in the first hour, the rate of retweeting then dropped off very rapidly, so that about 70% of the total retweets occurred within the first hour of the original post.

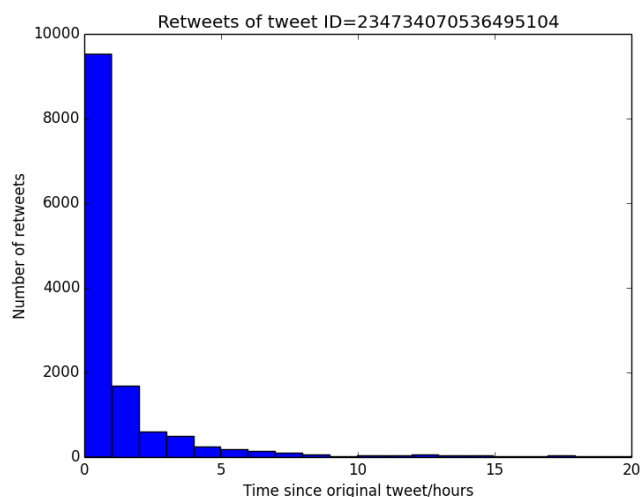


Figure 89: Number of retweets by time

As a point of comparison, consider another of Tom Daley's tweets, which this time contains a URL:

Love this photo! <http://t.co/eC9sClgi>

This tweet was retweeted 11,299 times, so around the same number as the previous tweet. However, the *pattern* of retweeting is markedly different from that of the original tweet, as shown in **Figure 10**.

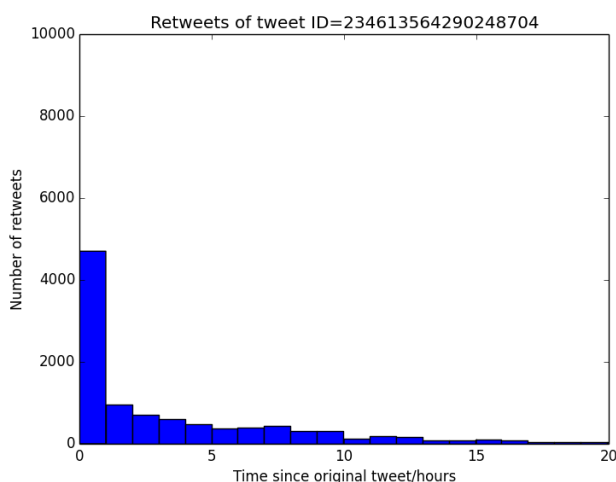


Figure 910: Number of retweets by time

In this case, the *rate* of retweeting falls off much less steeply; only about 40% of the total retweets took place in the first hour, with several hundred retweets happening 7 hours or more after the original post. In fact, plotting the two histograms on the same chart shows that the second tweet has a higher absolute number of tweets after about two hours than the first tweet (**Figure 11**).

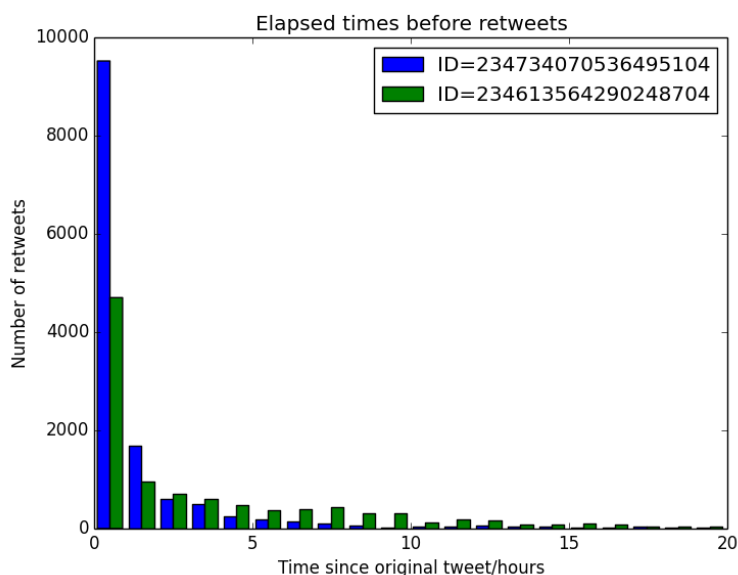


Figure 1011: Comparison of total number of retweets

Plots of the ageing factor of the two tweets against time for the two tweets (**Figure 12**) shows that the plot of ageing factors of the first tweet, shown in blue, is initially steeper and tends towards a final ageing factor of 1.0 more rapidly than the second tweet (shown in green).

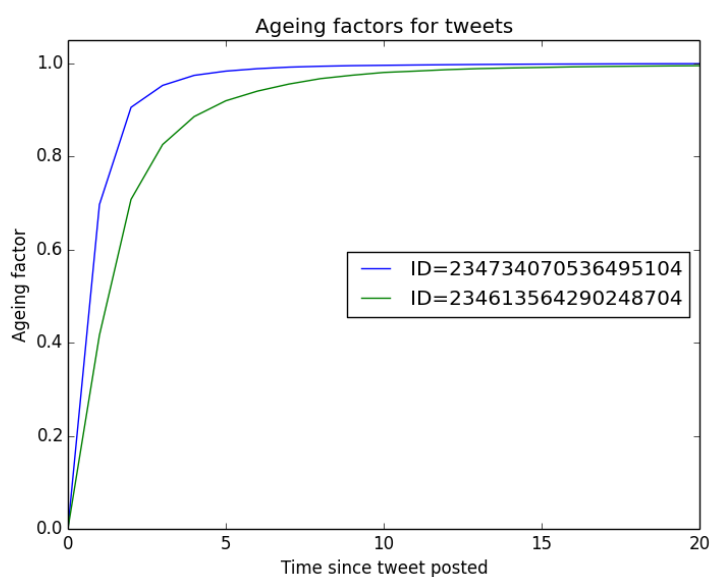


Figure 1112: Comparison of ageing factors

These values of ageing factor can be closely fitted to an exponential decay, according to the formula:

$$1 - e^{-kt}$$

where t is time in hours following the original tweet. A value of k can then be found whose magnitude gives an indication of the rate of decay. We will call this rate of exponential decay, the *rate of obsolescence* of a particular tweet.

As an indicative guide, if $k=1$, then after 1 hour, around 64% of the retweets have taken place, after 2 hours, around 75%, after 3 hours, around 86% and so on. Curve fitting was carried out with the python scipy curve fitting library.¹⁰

For the two graphs above, the first tweet is well modelled by a graph with a rate of obsolescence of $k=1.17$ (**Figure 13**).

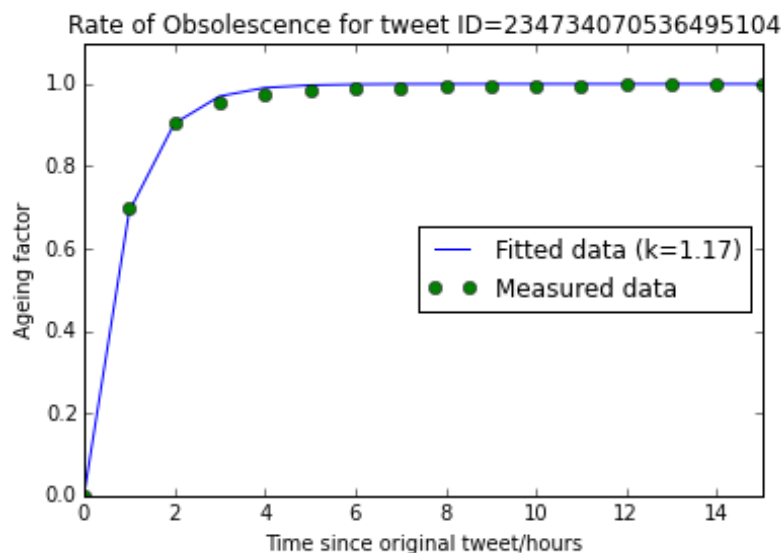


Figure 1213: High rate of obsolescence

In comparison, the second tweet, which aged more slowly, has a value of $k=0.56$ (**Figure 14** below).

We propose that the rate of obsolescence of a tweet (ie. the value k) is indicative of the level of engagement of the public with that tweet. In the above examples, we assume that the first tweet, which has a higher rate of obsolescence ($k=1.17$), is less influential than the second. The lower rate of obsolescence of the second tweet ($k=0.56$) suggests that users consider the content of that tweet to still be relevant longer. That the tweet is being retweeted for a longer time indicates that users believe the tweet still has something original or valuable to say for a longer period after the original post.

Of course, for any given tweet, there are any number of factors which will influence the pattern of retweeting. In these cases, the content of the original tweet:

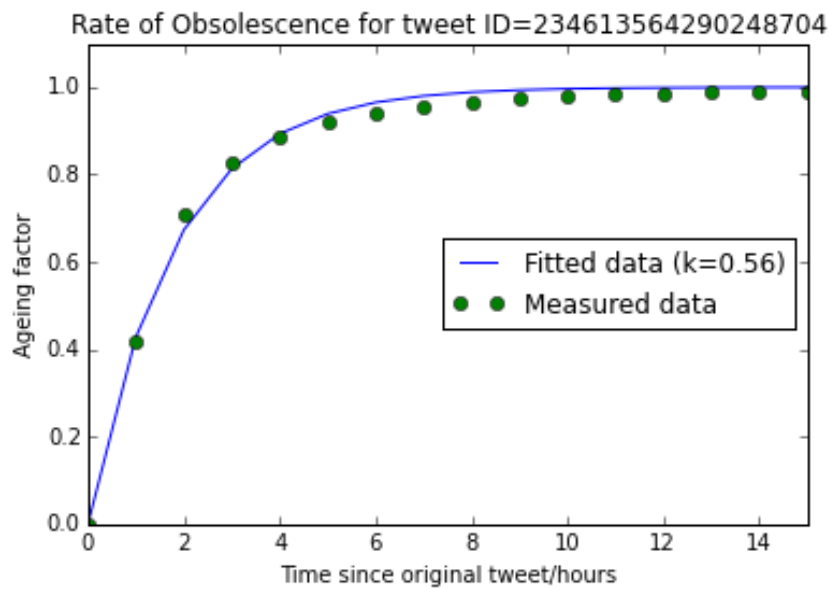


Figure 1314: Low rate of obsolescence

Closing ceremony tonight!!!!

is quite generic, and so may have a short lifespan. On the other hand, the second tweet:

Love this photo! <http://t.co/eC9sClgi>

is linked to a photograph of Tom Daley celebrating his medal win (**Figure 15**):

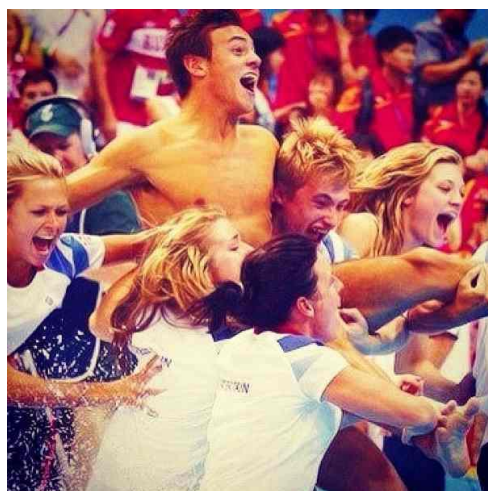


Figure 1415: Tom Daley's tweeted photograph

The longer lifespan of this tweet could possibly be attributed to the very personal nature of the content.

Alternatively, the second tweet's lifespan could be attributable to it being less time specific: a comment about the forthcoming closing ceremony is clearly only relevant in the run-up to that event, while the time at which a post-medal celebration becomes less relevant is much less clearly defined.

So in general there are many factors which contribute to the number of times that a tweet might be retweeted. However, looking at the overall profile of a particular user's account might give us some insight into the broader influence of that user. In the remaining discussion, we look at the retweeting profiles from different account types, rather than the profiles of individual tweets.

Influence of different account types

Although the ageing factor applies to an individual tweet, a greater insight can be obtained by considering the ageing factors of a collection of tweets. In this section, we will consider the behaviour of a collection of tweets to attempt to understand the relative influence of different accounts.

As an illustration, consider again the tweets sent by Tom Daley. To attempt to visualise the overall behaviour of tweets from his account, **Figure 16** shows a boxplot of the ageing factors of the 100 most retweeted tweets from Tom Daley's account. As usual with a boxplot, each box contains the second and third quartiles of the values at that value, and the central line in red represents the points' median value. So for the set of tweets under consideration, the median ageing factor after 1 hour is approximately 0.5, the median ageing factor after 2 hours is approximately 0.8 and so on.

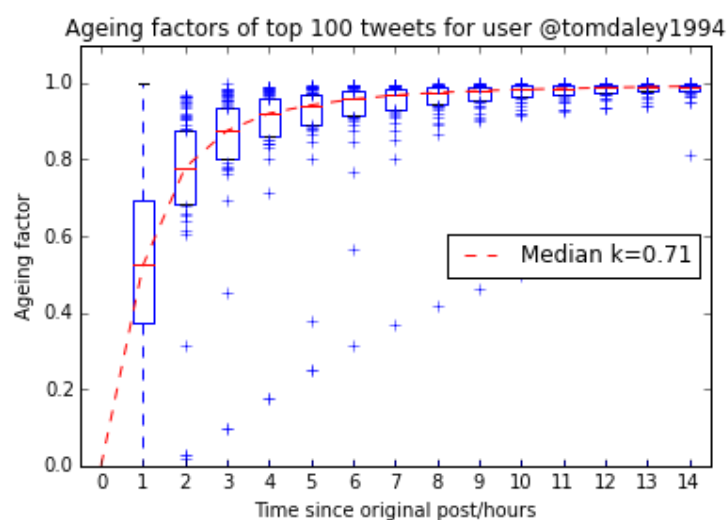


Figure 1516: Ageing factors boxplot for @tomdaley1994

In this case, an ageing factor curve has been fitted to the median value of the ageing factor for each hour up to 15 hours after the original post. This gives a median rate of obsolescence of $k=0.71$ for Tom Daley's tweets.

To compare with a similar athlete, **Figure 17** shows a similar plot for the most retweeted tweets of the American swimmer Missy Franklin,¹¹ from the account @franklinmissy.

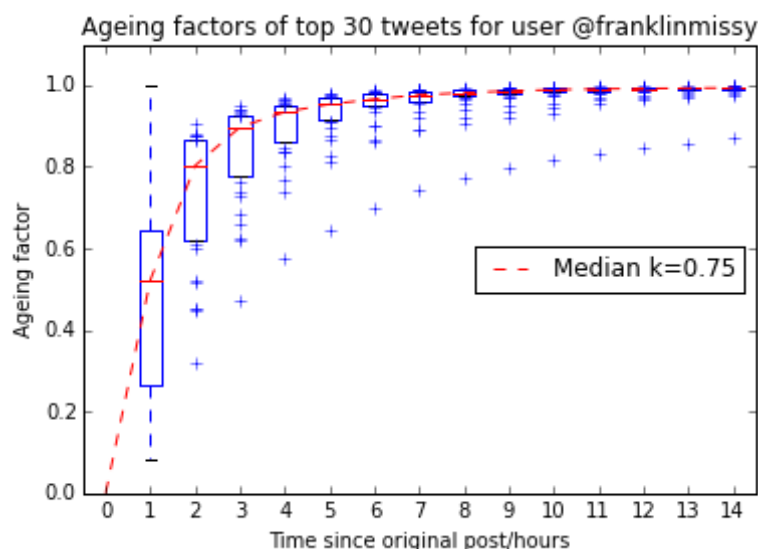


Figure 1617: Ageing factors boxplot for @franklinmissy

Both athletes' accounts show similar median ageing factors. To compare the general pattern of the tweets from Tom Daley and Missy Franklin with those of two corporate Twitter accounts, **Figure 18** shows the boxplots for the combined ageing factors from the set of four corporate BBC accounts: @bbcsport, @bbc2012, @bbcnews and @bbcworld. It is clear from the plot that the tweets from these accounts have a far higher ageing factor than the tweets from the two athletes' accounts; the median ageing factor of the main corporate accounts is $k=2.37$, significantly higher than the two athletes' accounts.

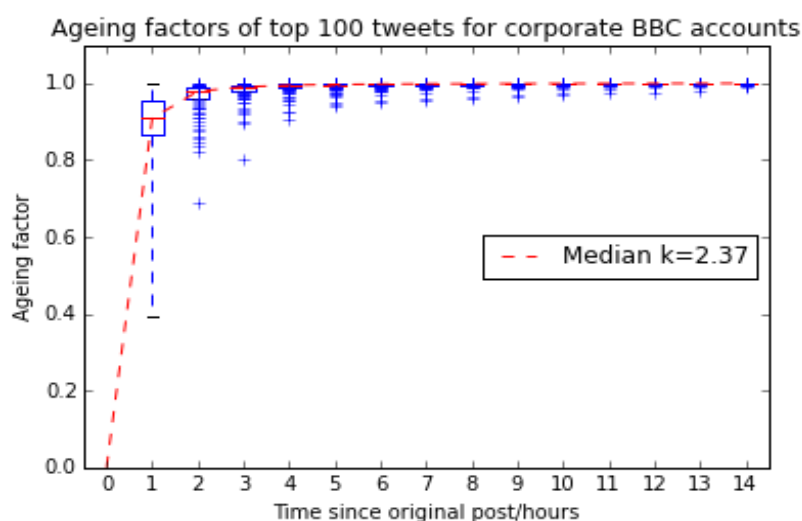


Figure 1718: Ageing factors boxplot for BBC corporate accounts

The official Olympics channel, @london2012 shows a similar pattern, with the rate of obsolescence being $k=1.83$, again much higher than that of the athletes (**Figure 19**).

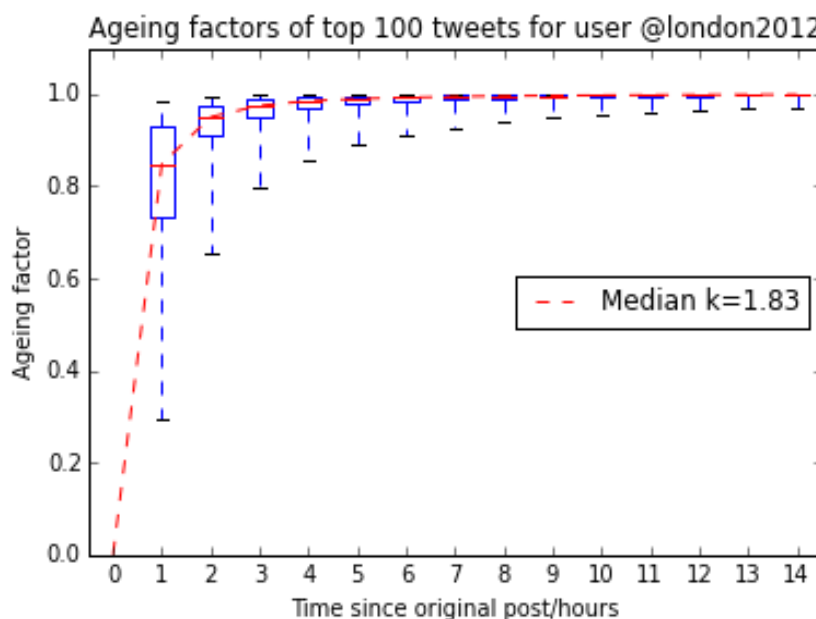


Figure 1849: Ageing factors boxplot for @london2012

So can this discrepancy be put down to a greater interest in the tweets of known people, rather than the output from a corporation? As well as its official accounts, the BBC also uses famous personalities (that is, who are famous as BBC employees, and who hosted the BBC Olympics coverage). To compare against the corporate BBC accounts, **Figure 20** and **Figure 21** show the patterns of ageing factors for the BBC pundits Gary Lineker and Claire Balding.

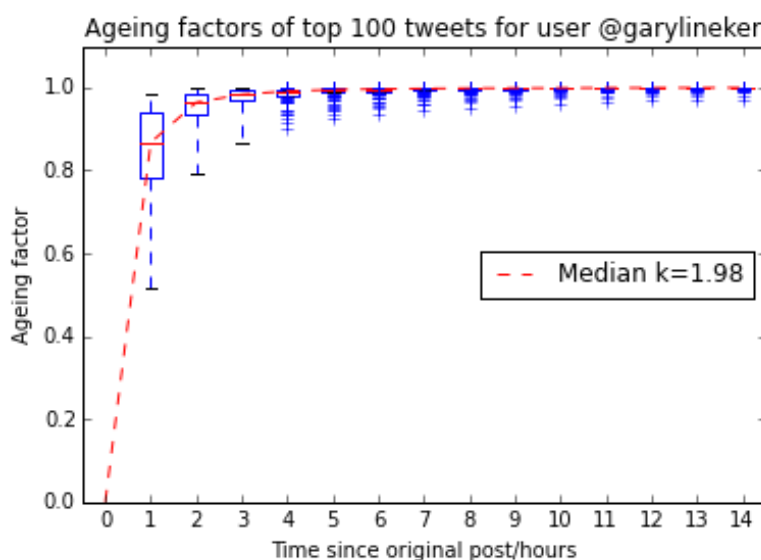


Figure 1920: Ageing factors boxplot for @garylineker

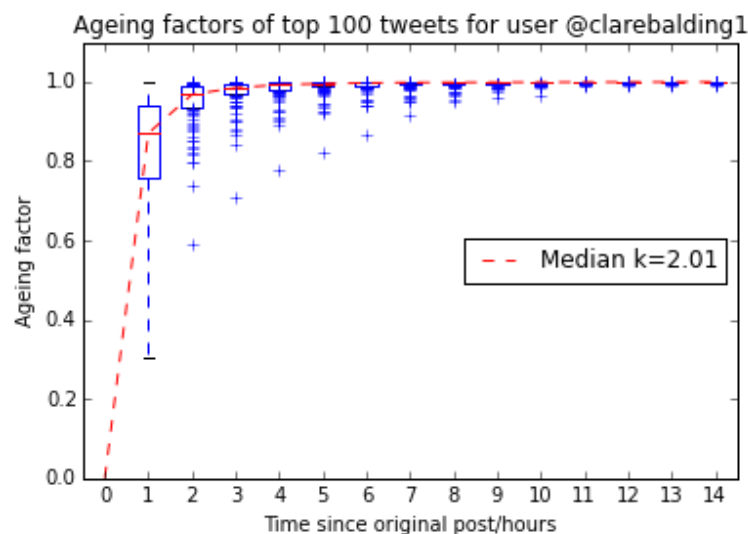


Figure 2021: Ageing factors boxplot for @clarebalding1

In both these cases, the patterns appear to be much closer to the corporate accounts (with a rate of obsolescence of around $k=2$) than they do to the athletes. If the rate of obsolescence is treated as a reasonable proxy for the degree of influence of a tweet, then in these cases, it doesn't seem to make much difference whether the tweet comes from a corporate account, or a better-known public face.

A comparison of replying and retweeting behaviour

Another possibility for investigating the degree of engagement that people make with Twitter accounts might be to look at how often people *reply* to a tweet, compared to *retweeting* it. We can describe a reply to a tweet, or a retweet of that tweet as a *response*, so that a response can be either a reply or a retweet. Replying to a tweet requires the user to invest the additional effort in composing an original response, whereas retweeting requires relatively little effort. We propose as a measure of engagement, therefore, that comparing the rate of replies and the rate of retweets may give an indication of the level of engagement of users with that tweet. That is, a tweet that has a high rate of replying to responding might be considered more influential than one which elicits retweets alone.

Figure 22 shows the total number of responses to Tom Daley's 30 most responded-to tweets,¹² divided into retweets and replies. Comparing the number of replies (shown in green) against the number of retweets (in blue), the number of replies is often quite substantial relative to the number of retweets. In many cases, the number of replies is around 20% of the total number of responses, although sometimes the proportion is much smaller (such as the tweets labelled 4, 8, 9 and so on in the figure), and sometimes quite a bit larger (such as the tweets labelled 5, 6, 12 and so on).

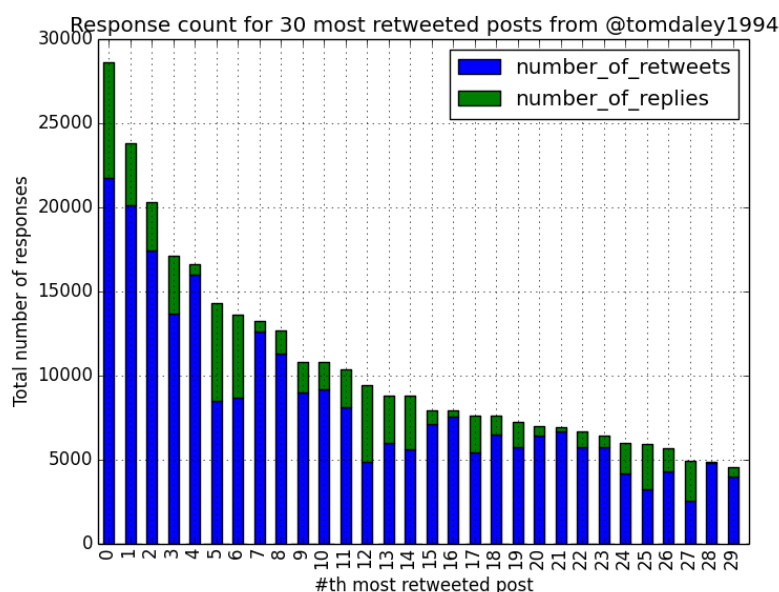


Figure 2122: Responses to @tomdaley1994

In comparison, how do the official BBC channels measure up to the same analysis? **Figure 23** and **Figure 24** show the equivalent figures for the @BBC2012 and @london2012 accounts respectively. The figures suggest that the ratio of replies to retweets from these corporate accounts is much lower than for Tom Daley: in very few cases is the number of replies even as high as 2% of the total number of responses.

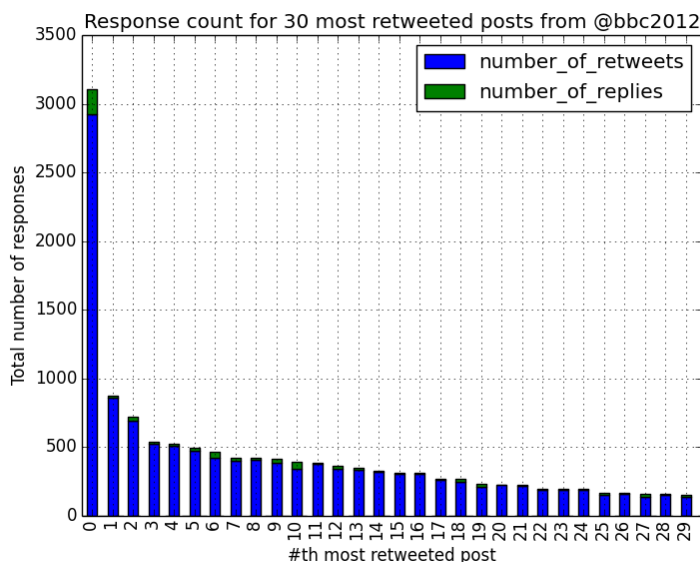


Figure 2223: Responses to @BBC2012

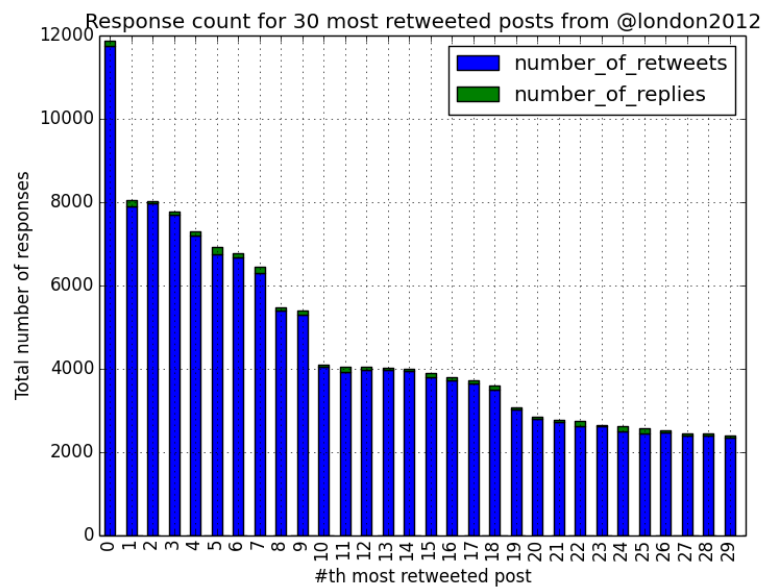


Figure 2324: Responses to @london2012

As before, we can now compare the pattern of responses to the corporate accounts to the patterns for the pundits' accounts. **Figure 25** shows the number of responses for the account @GaryLineker, and how they split between retweet and response. The graph indicates that there are several posts that have a relatively high number of replies. Indeed, for the tweets labelled 7, 10, 18 and 28 in the plot, the number of replies to the tweet constitute at least 80% of the total number of responses.

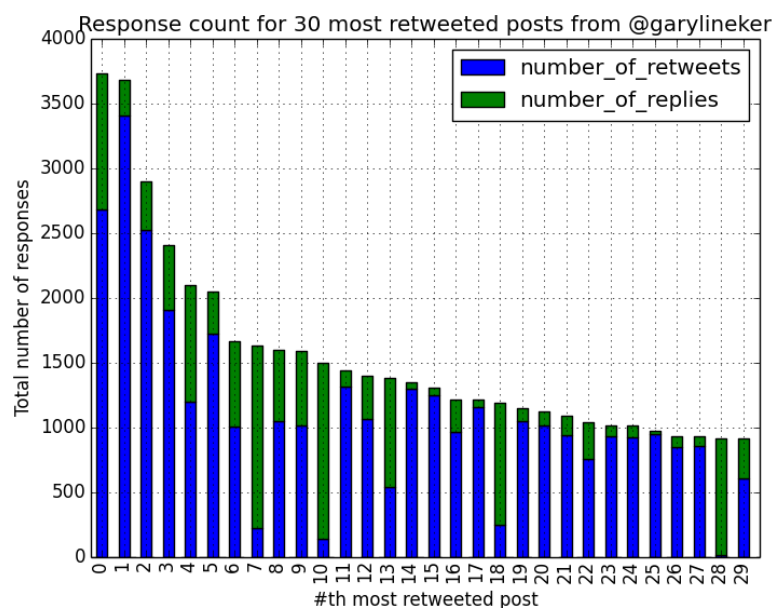


Figure 2425: Responses to @garylineker

It is not always obvious what the content was of those posts that elicited a high proportion of replies (although a more extensive analysis might provide some directions in these cases). The two posts with the highest number of replies as a ratio of responses are:

Thank you so much for all the really kind tweets about our coverage. This time next week I'll be getting hammered over MOTD running order.

and:

Decision has been made to put me inside the Olympic stadium to present tomorrow night. 100metre final. Could not be more excited #lovemyjob

However, looking at responses to the corporate account @BBCSport, it is clear that it is possible to engage users by asking specific questions. Although the average rate of replies is low for the @BBCSport account (at around 4%), where replies are specifically elicited, that rate can be much higher for individual tweets. Two examples are:

OK guys and gals, who would like to see light the Olympic cauldron? #bbc2012

for which 97% of the responses were a reply, and:

What was your favorite moment of London 2012 and what do we need to do to ensure the Games' legacy. Get involved with #bbcsportsday

for which 87% of the responses were a reply. These suggest that although users' primary mode of engagement with the corporate accounts is to retweet rather than reply, users will engage with the accounts in a conversational manner if invited to do so.

As another point of comparison, the ratio of replies to retweets can be compared for a larger collection of accounts. **Figure 26** shows the fraction of responses that are replies (rather than retweets) for six accounts: two corporate accounts (@bbc2012 and @london2012), two pundit accounts (@clarebalding1 and @garylineker) and two athletes' accounts (@ryanlochte and @tomdaley1994). In these cases, it appears that the pattern of responses to the pundits' accounts is much more similar to the athletes' accounts than it is to the corporate accounts. In the case of the pundits and athletes, the median fraction of responses that are replies is between 20% and 30% in each case, while the median fraction of responses to the corporate accounts comes to less than 10% in each case.

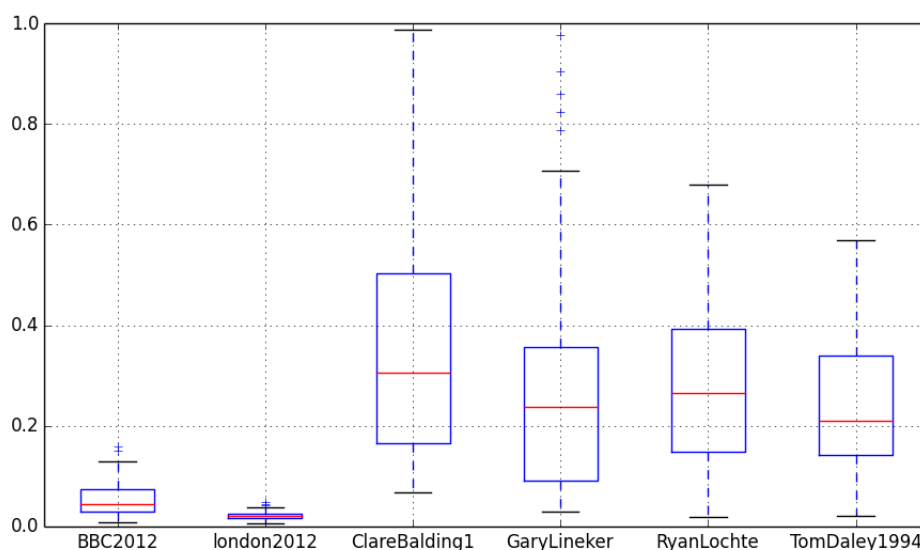


Figure 2526: Fraction of responses that are replies (1)

Finally, we might want to draw a comparison with corporate accounts that are specifically designed to cause engagement. Radio 5 live is a good example, as that is the BBC's main national station specialising in interactive radio programmes such as phone-ins. For comparison, a plot is shown in **Figure 27**. In this case, the @bbc5live account appears to straddle the values for the pundits and the corporate accounts; even though the tweets come from an account which is specifically intended to draw comment from its audience, the number of replies to its tweets is still lower than those to official pundits.

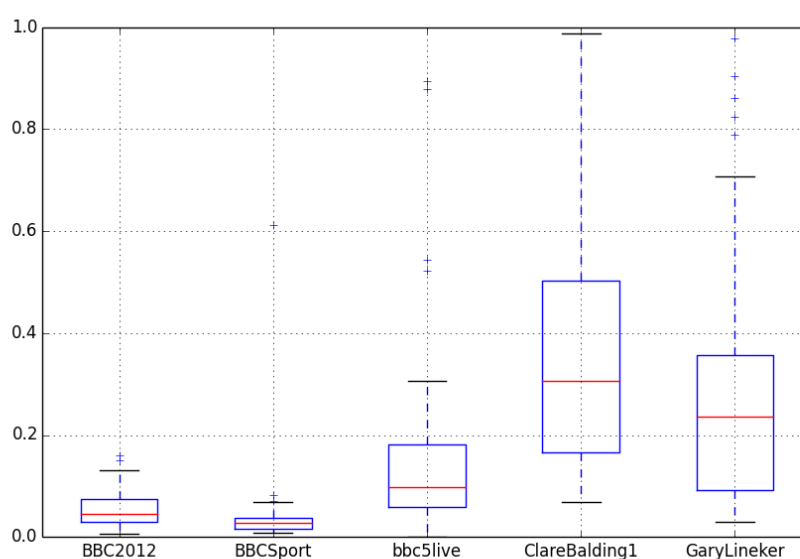


Figure 2627: Fraction of responses that are replies (2)

Broadly, the lessons found from comparing the retweet to reply ratio appear to be that:

- Tweets posted by BBC corporate accounts had a very small number of replies. This suggests that it is unlikely that users view tweets from a corporate account as part of the Twitter conversation. Rather, it may be that users treat corporate accounts as mere information providers (similar to the traditional broadcast model).
- Tweets posted by BBC pundits/commentators had a much higher number of replies (but still smaller than the number of retweets). This suggests that users are more likely to reply to a tweet from a BBC pundit/commentator—in other words, pundits and commentators may be more likely to encourage active participation than corporate accounts.
- The pattern of replying vs. retweeting is comparable for pundits and athletes.

Findings

We have looked at two ways of measuring the level of engagement that users may have with tweets, and what those measures might tell us about how users engage with different types of Twitter accounts. The ageing factor measure indicates how long after an initial post users still consider a tweet to be relevant.

Account name	Account type	Number of followers/1000 ¹³	Average response rate (responses/thousand followers)	Median <i>k</i>	Median reply rate ¹⁴ /%
london2012	Corporate	1380	0.35	1.83	2.00
BBC2012	Corporate	78.8	0.70	2.37	4.53
BBCSport	Corporate	437	0.11	2.38	4.65
ClareBalding1	Pundit	214	0.41	2.01	30.6
GaryLineker	Pundit	938	0.22	1.98	23.7
franklinmissy	Athlete	269	0.85	0.75	27.7
RyanLochte	Athlete	774	0.68	0.87	26.6
TomDaley1994	Athlete	1120	0.60	0.71	21.0

Table 1: Rates of obsolescence and rate of replies for Twitter accounts

The overall figures for the different types of accounts are shown in **Table 1**. The third column shows the number of followers of each account (in thousands), and the fourth column gives an indication of the rate of responses to each of the accounts' tweets. The rate

of response shown is the average number of responses per tweet, per thousand followers. So for example, the tweets from the account @GaryLineker elicited an average of 0.22 responses on average for every thousand users following that account (or one response for every 455 followers). In fact, the rate of response is surprisingly consistent across all the accounts, being in the order of one response per ten thousand followers.

The fifth column, median k , shows the median rate of obsolescence for the tweets posted by that account. A lower value in this column corresponds to a lower rate of obsolescence (that is, the tweet continues to be tweeted for longer). Comparing the rate of obsolescence from the athletes' accounts against those of the corporate and pundit accounts suggests that the athletes' tweets seem to remain relevant longer than those of the pundits and the corporate accounts. In fact, there appears to be little difference between the retweeting patterns of the BBC corporate accounts and those of the pundits. The official @london2012 account has a slightly lower rate of obsolescence than those of the BBC accounts, but is still very much higher than the accounts of the athletes.

In contrast, the tweets of the pundits seem to attract more *replies* than those of the corporate accounts, and by that measure, the degree of engagement with the pundits is more comparable to the athletes' accounts than it is to the corporate accounts, even when those corporate accounts are designed to stimulate discussion and engagement. Again, the interaction with the @london2012 is much closer to that of the BBC corporate accounts than the athletes' accounts; users appeared to be much less likely to have replied to the official LOCOG twitter account than to those accounts associated with a particular individual.

A particular point of interest is the comparison between the retweeting rates for the @BBCSport account and the LOCOG @london2012 account, and their respective locations in the Key Actor Analysis plot in **Figure 5**. The retweeting rates suggest that the manner of user engagement with these two accounts is very similar, but the scatter plot indicates that the two accounts play very different roles within the network. The location of the @BBCSport account in the Key Actor Analysis plot suggests that the @BBCSport account has relatively high betweenness centrality, and as such is an information provider to a specific community, more so than the @london2012 account. Comparing these two accounts then, suggests that there are accounts which are primarily about providing information, and whose users engage with those accounts in the same way. However, for some cases (such as the @BBCSport account), the betweenness centrality of the account within the network suggests that that account is more likely to cater to a specific audience or demographic within the whole of the social network.

This demonstrates that the influence of an account is a product both of the content of that account (which determines whether its content is retweeted and/or replied to), as well as its position in the network, which determines how users' responses to that account shape the network as a whole.

Conclusions

In this paper, we have considered different ways in which it is possible to estimate how different mechanisms of engagement with social media affect the degree of influence that can be exerted. The analyses fit broadly into two different models; the network metrics and key actor analyses are concerned mainly with the connectedness of different users across the social network, while the ageing factor analysis and examination of response types characterises accounts in terms of the influence of their individual tweets.

An important finding of the key actor analysis appears to be that a key BBC corporate account, @BBCSport, formed an important bridge to a community of users other accounts did not reach. This suggests that the corporate presence of traditional broadcasters can have the effect of *shaping the network*, even if users do not directly interact with those accounts.

The key actor analysis also identified groups of users whose importance was as authoritative sources of information that were widely retweeted; in Figure 3, the accounts @TomDaley1994, @RyanLochte and @london2012 were in this category. The ageing factor analysis adds further insight to the key actor analysis. In the Olympics data set, the ageing factor analyses for tweets suggested that tweets from most BBC accounts, whether corporate or via a pundit, have a very rapid ageing factor. For these accounts, almost no retweeting occurring after around 2 hours. So Tom Daley and Ryan Lochte were identified as key actors, and the ageing factor analysis suggests that their tweets had a lower rate of obsolescence than those from the BBC accounts. This might possibly reflect the immediacy of BBC tweets; in many cases, the tweets (in particular those from the BBC corporate accounts) focus on conveying information rather than attempting to start a conversation.

However, there are also significant differences seen in the retweet to reply ratio of tweets in the corpus. The analysis suggests that users are very unlikely to reply to a tweet from a corporate account, but are much more likely to reply to a tweet from an official pundit. This might suggest that the human face of a pundit is likely to encourage more active participation than official accounts. In fact, the pattern of replying v. retweeting was similar for pundits and athletes, suggesting that users are more likely to engage with an account that is seen as belonging to a person rather than an institution. From the perspective of commercial or other major providers, this therefore suggests that well-known presenters might be more appropriate for attempting to improve engagement. On the other hand, the position of an account such as @BBCSport suggests there can be significant value in the way that the corporate accounts are able to shape the network and form a valuable mechanism for disseminating information.

The Key Actor Analysis suggests that some accounts are able to increase the overall connectedness across the network as a whole because of their own high connectedness. It equally demonstrates that some communities of users currently choose to interact with a small group of similar accounts, which may be served by one or two important gatekeepers. For major institutions such as the BBC, which can have pre-existing reputations as information providers, their institutional accounts can help to shape the network by

consciously connecting different communities and so influence the ways in which information is disseminated. Equally there will be times when despite the reputation of major news organisations, communities will turn to pundits or athletes for information. In these occasions, major news organisations may find athletes or pundits act as gatekeepers or reach multipliers for institutional accounts and content.

Very popular accounts (e.g. @TomDaley1994, @RyanLochte) serve as the stimulation for discussion. These actors are generally both widely retweeted, as well as generating a lot of mentions among the broader Twitter community. The rate of obsolescence of the tweets from these accounts is generally lower than that from corporate accounts (even those fronted by real people, such as the pundit accounts), indicating that these users' tweets are seen as important for longer than is the case for the corporate accounts. However, examining the reply/retweet ratio profiles of the accounts suggests that users are more likely to interact with pundits than with corporate accounts.

The use of Twitter during the Olympics as an element of the wider strategy to 'exploit the public diplomacy and "soft power" potential of the Games' allowed users to develop habits of interaction with BBC corporate accounts, pundits and competing athletes.

As expected, Twitter users tended to develop habits of engagement with different clusters of accounts. As a result, well-connected corporate accounts can help shape the network and affect the connectivity of the network, while the accounts which increase interaction are those which are associated with an identifiable individual.

This article used data collected during the Olympic and Paralympic Games. Analysis of interaction with BBC and BBC World Service via Twitter over a longer period of time would be needed to establish whether interactions during London 2012 became lasting habits of engagement.

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Notes:

¹ House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee FCO Public Diplomacy: The Olympic and Paralympic Games 2012, *Second Report of Session 2010–11 Report*, together with formal minutes, oral and written evidence Ordered by the House of Commons (printed 26 January 2011). Page 3.

² House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee FCO Public Diplomacy: The Olympic and Paralympic Games 2012, *Second Report of Session 2010–11 Report*, together with formal minutes, oral and written evidence Ordered by the House of Commons (printed 26 January 2011). Page 3.

³ House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee FCO Public Diplomacy: The Olympic and Paralympic Games 2012, *Second Report of Session 2010–11 Report*, together with formal minutes, oral and written evidence Ordered by the House of Commons (printed 26 January 2011). Page 11.

⁴ House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee FCO Public Diplomacy: The Olympic and Paralympic Games 2012, *Second Report of Session 2010–11 Report*, together with formal minutes, oral and written evidence Ordered by the House of Commons (printed 26 January 2011)

⁵ <http://www.cosmosproject.net>.

⁶ In this paper, we use the conventional prefix '@' to indicate a Twitter account. Twitter account names are not case sensitive, so @London2012 and @london2012 would refer to the same account.

⁷ Edge weight was used to represent relationships that contained more frequent interactions.

⁸ Most elements of the analysis network visualization (including **Figure 2**) were conducted using Gephi (<http://gephi.github.io/>), with additional analysis conducted using igraph in R (<http://igraph.org/r/>) and Networkx in Python (<https://networkx.github.io/>), to check the calculations of network metrics.

⁹ Modularity (0.61)

¹⁰ <http://scipy.org/>

¹¹ In this case we have used the top 30 tweets of Missy Franklin, as the remaining tweets in the corpus were retweeted less than 100 times.

¹² That is, the thirty tweets which elicited the largest number of responses altogether.

¹³ In fact, the median number of followers over the collection of tweets.

¹⁴ That is, the proportion of responses which are a reply, rather than a retweet.